Interview with Mr. Maurice Ratner
Conducted by Dr. James L. Dodson and
Miss Emily Lawton - April 29, 1982

TAPE 1 - SIDE 1 & 2

DODSON: Mr. Ratner, would you give us your full name and tell us where you were born, when you came to the valley?

RATNER: My name is Maurice Ratner and I was born in [SIC] Texas, and I came to the valley in 1914, to Sun Valley.

DODSON: Then you have really seen the valley grow. And you have lived here in Sun Valley the full time since then?

DODSON: Yes, we've lived here since 1915 in Sun Valley and the last 20 years in North Hollywood.

DODSON: Okay, now we had asked you where you from and you had told us, and you came to the valley in 1915. That was when World War I was on. Do you remember anything about that and its affect on the valley?

RATNER: Actually the war didn't start in 1915, it started a little later, I think 1917 or 1918.

That's when I started high school at San Fernando High, it was in 1918 and I had to join the R.O.T.C. Every boy that started school and you had uniforms, and was promoted and I became a Corporal. In fact all boys had to join this R.O.T.C. and so. That carried on later in high school and college, they had R.O.T.C. As far as the war was concerned, all I knew was that there was a war going on, people enlisted and in fact at the school we had one boy who was only 17 or 18, and that particular time there was a flu epidemic and he came back and that sort of killed the appetite of all the other boys to join. But there wasn't much going on...

DODSON: You're talking about shortages of things...

RATNER: There was no shortages during the first World War. It didn't affect...there were no factories out there. They wanted to put a hospital for the Veterans and later on they advertised some years later, and they put in a Veteran's Hospital in Southern California. They had 101 requests to put in a hospital in each town, because I remember they were hiring a lot of people, you know nurses and so on and

so forth. And they turned around and sent a committee out from Washington and checked, and they found different places. I think number three was out by San Diego and so on, and number two was Monrovia, that was Orange County Monrovia.

DODSON: That's still in Los Angeles County?

RATNER: Yes, in Los Angeles County, close to Orange County. But number one they found the healthiest place from Bakersfield to border, was right here in San Fernando. Because here it was 1400 to 1500 feet, close to 2000 feet high, and no smog...well they didn't have smog, but no fog, that's how it happened. And we were happy to get it here, because they hired all those people. Outside of that I don't remember anything special. My dad and folks came from New York City and they got into the importing business, and what he was importing mostly came from Scotland, Europe and England. In the meantime, he had a business out here too. It didn't affect people much here. It probably affected people more back East than it would here in the First World War.

DODSON: Would you say that then World War II was much more significant on the affects on people.

RATNER: The second World War, we had already developed the country and altogether...you could feel it and realize it every day, you heard about it on the news, you had black window shades, turn off the lights and all sorts of things. You were conscious of it all the time.

DODSON: Do you remember what became short first...what were the principle shortages that you remember?

RATNER: I had and opened a real estate office when I was seventeen, as soon as I finished high school. I went to U.S.C. for five years. The first two years I took pharmacy, in those days it took two years, now a days it takes six years to go. I became a druggist and got my license, and so on. And I stayed with real estate and then I went on to law school. But then the depression came, real estate was very slow and it all stopped during the 30's after the boom of the 20's. The first things that went short was luxuries. The first thing that affected people of any importance, you had ration stamps, there was plenty of gas, and

eventually you had rationed gas, but there was enough gas. People didn't travel much in those days. The tires was a very important thing. Now a tire will go, like I said the life of the car, but in those days, tires were precious. You had to watch your tires. And besides in those days tires were made from...today they're manufactured with chemicals, but in those days it was rubber, so you had to watch your tires. The second thing in the way of luxury was cigarettes and you had to line up to get cigarettes. Another thing that was a shortage, if you had to wear nylon hose, that was something. There would be a line to get a pair of nylon hose when there was a sale. There was no shortage of food and no shortage of labor. So that's the only thing that there were shortages of.

DODSON: So the valley went through both World Wars without any real problems?

RATNER: Yes, yes, there was no problems, only during the depression, that's when things changed.

DODSON: Could you tell us a little bit about the depression and the affect on the valley?

RATNER: Yeah, that's something that those of us that went through it, won't forget. When we were small and the kids would go visit someone else's home, the first thing you'd see on the table was a Bible, and this big album of pictures of their families and everybody would take family pictures, and so on. Then we'd buy a camera, 116 or 120 camera, it would cost you a dollar and you'd buy film, and everybody would take pictures. Just like today, you see Japanese people come and you always see them with cameras, you know. That's the way it use to be in those days, kids would have...not so much grown ups, but everybody was taking pictures. So I use to take pictures of all sorts of things and if you'd be interested, I will show you some.

DODSON: Yes, those would be quite interesting.

RATNER: When we were kids we use to listen, you know today adults listen to children. When people get to be fifty, they start reminiscing and start telling stories, but then you can tell that they're getting senile, getting old and senile, and start repeating things. As you grow up you start repeating things, and that's

an indication that you're getting senile. So I would never discuss or never talk about when people ask when did water come here, what was it like, I never discuss that. Because that is a good indication that your over fifty and getting senile.

DODSON: Well in our case, we want that. Because we want to put it on record about all those things.

RATNER: So, your working for senile people? So anyways...in the last couple of years since young people ask many interesting and various things about...roots made it popular. Actually for children, they should know, that's how they will appreciate what is happening and so. Anyways coming back to the depression...

DODSON: Was there much real suffering in the valley, would you say?

RATNER: What happened was...was exactly what happened during the depression was this, you can imagine in the 20's everybody working, towards the end it got slow, then when the crash came, the stock market and everything stopped. There was

no industry out here in the valley to speak of. In Los Angeles they had the street car line, it cost a nickel to go to work. Of course, out here we had the Red Line, it was quarter and thirty-five cents, but whoever could go into town, if they were renting, they would go into town, so they would get on a nickel street car and be close to the market and to the stores. So that...nobody was coming out and ourselves we had the six or seven houses to rent, and at that time they called it...well it's same as what we call it now, County Welfare, and another name for it and the top was $12 a month. It wasn't much because actually it was worth $25 and $30 in those days. Rather than to leave the house empty, because if it stood empty for a week, they would totally rip out the plumbing and tear it up, so we got $12 a month, what the County would pay. A lot of people left and as far as business, a lot of empty stores. There was no...actually there was no industry out there, only thing the studios were working, you know, Universal City and Columbia. Studios were there. Naturally there were the farms. And then started the WPA and the government had projects, that they would hire people and the city would try to

hire some people. Each community had a program like downtown down on Los Angeles Street they had warehouses and in Orange County instead of dumping oranges, they would bring in and chuck those oranges. They would get day old bread and bring it in there, and in the packing houses they would bring in...I'll never forget they use to have salt pork, slabs of it. As far as what they would get from the County, the highest they would get from the County was $40 a month. Most of them got $30 and this how they had to get along. In fact have you ever heard of Townsend?

DODSON: Yeah, the Townsend Plant.

RATNER: How much did he ask for?

DODSON: Two hundred a month.

RATNER: You know it's a strange thing, I don't volunteer...like I've been asked to come and talk, because there a lot of things that come out in the valley, that somebody says this...

DODSON: We're glad to get any [SIC], you go right ahead.

RATNER: When I say something, I know personally or I have some picture or something written down, or else I don't say it. Because $70 a month, you know that was considered a radical amount, imagine getting $70 a month without working just because they're old or something.

DODSON: And then his proposal was that they spend the whole amount each month, wasn't it?

RATNER: Yeah, then the other group that came along...you can imagine there were a lot of educated fellows, technicrafts they called themselves and they were out here too. This stuff carried on until Franklin Roosevelt came along. And up until Franklin Roosevelt came along the government was always...there was no deficit, they weren't in debt, they didn't care, in other words he came along, the first year just to bring the country out of...with $33 billion he was going to put the country together. A lot of people said he was going to ruin the country and today it's more than $33 billion.

DODSON: Oh yes, way more.

RATNER: And this was going to bring back prosperity. And then during the depression, it was just rough. Remember we mentioned people bought homes and splurged during the 20's, everybody had their dream and everybody wanted a home. They'd come out to the valley, Culver City and Pasadena, and buy a home. In those days two bedroom homes were $3000.00 or $3500.00, whatever they had done and $30, $40 or $50 a month. And the loan companies carried it, just the like loan companies carry it today and so on. But if you couldn't make the payments, they would foreclose and that was the said part, foreclosure. On top of that, you'd work a long time and you saved enough to make a down payment on a house and your paying along $35 or $40 a month, then you lost your job or something happened that you couldn't pay, so they would take it. In three months, first it would default and then it would foreclose. Then they would see how much your house was worth, let's say $3000.00 and you owed $1500, they sell it for $1000 and you'd owe them $1000, and they would file that against you. And anytime you went to work a year later or five years later, they'd make you pay that $1000 with interest. So that's when the State

came along and passed the law, that you can't have a deficiency judgement on real estate. And that's the price today. Today if you buy a home, you buy a million dollar home and put $100,000, and you have to move out, they can't sue you for the balance.

DODSON: Of course you can foreclose the mortgage in that case.

RATNER: Well I mean the property owner...you see today if you buy an automobile for $5000 and you put a down payment of $1000, and you keep paying another $1000, you owe them $3000. Then you can't pay no more, you get divorced, you get sick, your in the hospital and they turn around and the guy sells the car for $1500 and you still owe the $1500, but if he sells it for $1000, you owe them $2000. That's the law today, but for real estate that changed during the depression.

DODSON: There was practically no market for real estate during the depression, was there?

RATNER: No, no, there was no demand, no necessity, nobody was...you could rent a nice house for

$25. There was no logical in going out and buying real estate.

DODSON: Now how does that compare with the situation today in 1982? The real estate market is pretty depressing again today, is it not?

RATNER: Well, right now it's in a mist, they don't call it...you see in 1905, this country...banks close, they called it a panic. In 1930, panic means everybody is scared, it's called a depressed. Now they call it recession.

DODSON: Yes, they don't want to use that word, depression.

RATNER: No, we haven't got a depression yet. So now you asked me what the real estate market is now, I'd say we haven't got any depression. We have to figure out what happens in a recession and this is what their story is now. In a recession now...I could show you, in the newspaper there's the defaults which use to be a half a page, now it's already four pages, four times as many that people are three months behind. The savings and loans are crying. Now the same happened during the depression, that's

when the government states that you have a moratorium, pay only the interest. Now that wouldn't affect the country much either, because you get 30 years to pay and in those days you had to pay it off in 12 years. In the 20's when you got a mortgage, you got a home and you paid so much a month for three years, then you had to renew it, then they made it 7 years the top, then when after the depression started out then 10, 12 and 15 years. But now they got it up to 30 years. So what they pay now is mostly interest. The only thing is that today people borrow from their relatives, and hang on to what they can. And the other thing that changed the picture a lot was rents went up, so the people that stayed in a...that rented an apartment for $100, and raise it up to $200 or $250, so they would turn around and they say if we pay another $50, we'll buy a house. so that created massive buyers. So the pictures changed now and the only problem is theres no apartments to rent...but these condominiums, not many houses today, because they sort of stop building houses the last few years.

DODSON: You have children of your own, do you not?

RATNER: Yes.

DODSON: How do you compare your education with theirs? Do you think your education is more thorough or theirs is?

RATNER: Today, naturally things are more educational. Even today having computers put into schools, but nevertheless we had to learn how to read, arithmetic and learn how to write, and people could read your handwriting. If you signed your name, people could your signature. Today, four out of five, you can't read what they write and so. We had to take what they called penmanship. So that's the only advantage.

DODSON: You think in those basic things they were more careful than today?

RATNER: Yes and we had respect for the teacher. That was the main thing.

DODSON: Was there much disorder in school at that time? Did the kids behave or did they act up?

RATNER: No kids behaved and the girls all behaved. The boys would get outside and figure out something

to irritate the teacher. The teacher would always blame me. There's only one thing I do remember, the kids would come to school on a bicycle and you know what they use in the lamps in those days for light?

LAWTON: Was it kerosene or oil?

RATNER: No, no that was tail lights. The carbine, yes the carbine, anyways we would drop that in water and they would get light. And on the desk we had a bottle of ink well and they would tell us not to put the carbine in the ink well, because it would make it bubble. And one kid would still do it and this kid would yell out and tell the teacher that the ink was on fire. It wasn't going to explode or anything, it just bubbled. Outside of that, our school was right by the foothills and we had rattlesnakes coming in and we would get to kill a rattlesnake, but they would still leave it around to scare kids.

DODSON: Was sort of social activities did you have when you were in high school or grade school?

RATNER: There wasn't much, we'd just play and kids would just play, nothing special.

DODSON: In high school did you have dances and that sort of thing?

RATNER: Oh yeah in high school we had that. At San Fernando High, when I went there was seven of us from Sun Valley and that brought it up to 100 children. In those days, there was San Fernando High and then Burbank High. I don't know what year Van Nuys High started, do you happen to know?

DODSON: I don't know. I know it was going in 1925, but I don't know how much earlier...

RATNER: It wasn't before though...it wasn't the first part...San Fernando High...and kids from North Hollywood would go into Hollywood High School. They had dances and parties, and played football. One thing that's interesting in those days, each high school had to specialize in something, so the City of Los Angeles at Manual Arts was mechanics and boys had to be mechanics. In Polytechnic it was mechanics and commercial business. In Hollywood it was art, because the studios were there and the girls...and it was sort of academic like. They went to L.A. High and then went into college,

that's why they went to L.A. High, so they could teach liberal arts. In fact, they didn't have mechanics there or a machine shop. At San Fernando High the boys had to sign up for mechanics the first year and agriculture and how to shoe a horse.

DODSON: I guess that was fairly important then?

RATNER: Yeah, you learned how to drive a tractor and learned how fix different things in the machine. Second year you had to have agriculture and you learned how to plant. Each guy had a quarter of an acre and you had to plant corn, and then they would grade us. They would grade you on the corn, how high the corn was and how it was. In June school was out and we'd come out and measure how high the corn was.

DODSON: Well, you mentioned that the high schools were specialized. Could you go to any high school in the city then, that was teaching what you wanted?

RATNER: Well yeah, they allowed you...you know they allowed to go wherever you wanted to go. Now

in the meantime we had this store and I use to come and help in the store. So I was interested in business and they had no business in the schools then. Like typing, bookkeeping, so I went into Los Angeles and stayed with a relative there, and I went there for two years and took up shorthand and bookkeeping, typing and stuff, and so on. And I finished at Polytechnic High School, in those days it was in Los Angeles and then moved out here to Sun Valley.

DODSON: Yes, we passed that on the way here and was telling Emily that they changed the name and brought the records of the old school out here to the new one. So you went there for awhile?

RATNER: Yes, to Los Angeles for two years and I graduated there.

DODSON: I see. Now when you went there, oh you said that you stayed with relatives?

RATNER: Yes.

DODSON: I was going to ask when you went to a high school out in your area, you had to pay your

transportation? There wouldn't be any busing, like we have now?

RATNER: No, there was busing here in Sun Valley and pick up the kids in San Fernando, they had buses in those days.

LAWTON: Did you pray or have religious classes when you were in school?

RATNER: No. When I went to school in San Fernando, at that time the mission was...you know the San Fernando Mission, of course it needed repair, but the interesting thing was that there must of been about 24 families there, Indian families living in the mission. Later on when the depression came, and they moved to Capistrano.

DODSON: Oh, they moved down there did they?

RATNER: They were called Mission Indians. In those days, we would go to see the indians then, it was interesting.

DODSON: Now Emily asked about praying in school, what sort of religious experience did you have in the valley?

RATNER: Well, as far as religion out here, I mentioned this one church that...the publisher of the L.A. Times is who?

LAWTON: Otis Chandler.

RATNER: Yes, Otis Chandler, his father's name was Norman. His grandfather's name was Harry Chandler. The great grandmother of Otis Chandler and I mentioned this Page, Mr. Page, they built this First Church of the Community. And in those days usually in the towns, it was called a Community Church, is what they had. Of course, we were Jewish, we did business here.

LAWTON: Did your family practice your religion as you were growing up?

RATNER: Oh, when we went into Los Angeles, there was no Jewish Synagogue in the valley.

LAWTON: I was curious because my family is Jewish and I...

RATNER: Your family is Jewish!

LAWTON: I was kind of curious what kind of...

RATNER: Where do you live now?

LAWTON: In Van Nuys.

RATNER: In Van Nuys, oh yeah. Oh, now we have the...like I say we happened to be one of the oldest living Jewish family in the valley. We had this one school in La Tuna Canyon, which is not the same school...but this was going on here...now we're talking about the 20's, people starting coming and so they needed schools. So my dad donated some property for the school and the city came out, and put a bungalow. Just so you could have 12 children and they could get money from State. And then they raised up to 15 children in one classroom and this is how it started out. This is off the subject, but its still about the school. One time things got rough and people were moving away or something, and of course the question was to keep up the

attendance. Of course in those days, if the parents had children, if they needed them to take care of the farm and they would only go to school for a month, and there were no traunt officers, and attendance would go down and up, and something. So we told...Dr. Hansen was told this problem and he said we'll take care of that. So he use to hire people and he use to advertise, I think it was in the Salt Lake area and around there...in Mormon families, so they got a couple of families. One family is called [SIC] and the other family is called, I can't think of the name. But a couple of families came and that took care of the school, because one family would have eight or eleven children. Next thing you know, the school is over crowded and we had another problem.

DODSON: I wanted to ask you about another pioneer Jewish family, if you knew them. Did you know the banker A. Levy, by any chance, who...

RATNER: No, they were up in Oxnard.

DODSON: I knew that his headquarters were up there, but I just wondered if you had ever come across him?

RATNER: No I didn't. He again, he came up to Oxnard, got married and then he went Protestant.

DODSON: Oh, I didn't know that. He was very, very highly thought of.

RATNER: Oh yeah. The bank still has his name.

DODSON: Yes, I know the bank still has his name. Then when was it that there were enough Jewish people in the family that the first temple was built out here?

RATNER: In the 20's when things were booming. In other words Jewish merchants would come in and open in Burbank and North Hollywood, and San Fernando, and Van Nuys. So we turned around and got together, and they were going to build...now this is in the 20's, in the late 20's. And they were going to build a...Greenberg was on that committee, and then came the depression. When the depression came, these merchants said the valley is going to go downhill and stay there, so they bought out and Greenberg stayed. Then there was no more until 1937 or 1938, then they got together, 15 families in North Hollywood and today they're

on Lankershim, Laurel Canyon and Burbank Boulevard. Actually there's about three charter families left. And then the next one we started was until after World War II. The G.I's could buy a home...

DODSON: So this one was the oldest?

RATNER: Yeah, it was called Valley Jewish Community Center and then it was changed. Then the second one came here in Sun Valley. Of course right after World War II, a lot of G.I's came and eventually stayed, because the government had the G.I. Bill to buy a home. You'd buy a 2 or 3 bedroom home for $50 to $100 for closing costs, and then it would run about $35 to $40 a month. Of course Studio City was already built up and Glendale was already built up. The closest place was right out here in Burbank, the outskirts of North Hollywood. So then we got together and started a synagogue. After the war, the government had camps all over and had these buildings, barracks, buildings and things. So they would sell them to these religious organizations.

DODSON: Is that right?

RATNER: Oh yeah. So the Salvation Army...

DODSON: No we haven't missed any information for lack of faith.

RATNER: This man he was from Glendale, he started out in the dairy business and he had a dairy there, and he was the Mayor for a number of years in Glendale and then he became the Supervisor of Los Angeles for about 12 years. In fact he was going to run for Governor, his name was Robert Chesup. So, we were very good friends. So he was in charge of the Salvation Army in Glendale and he's got this building, and he wants to put it out here, but he's got to have someplace put on and he went out looking for a lot. So we gave him a lot and moved on, and of course this was right after the war, so we used that for the synagogue. That was our first synagogue. My Uncle and two of us bought an acre and half, and started to build there and then they outgrew it...it's now on Roscoe Boulevard, its called Beth Israel, right near past Coldwater, past near the other big church. So that was the second one. Since then Burbank has built a synagogue, and since then they have built about 12 or 15 more synagogues.

DODSON: Do you remember the name of the first Rabbi of this temple?

RATNER: Well actually the first paid Rabbi we had was Sidney Goldstein, was his name. He was a full time Rabbi, paid Rabbi.

LAWTON: What did you have before that? You mentioned that there was another gentleman, what was his position before that?

RATNER: Well before, he wasn't actually a full fledged Rabbi, so we can't count that. He was in insurance. Amongst Judiasm, its like the Mormons and Seventh Day Adventist, a layman could be a minister...a layman could conduct services.

DODSON: I see. So you could have a regular service without having a full Rabbi?

RATNER: As long as you have ten men. In some places you had women. But its ten men for a service. But the full fledged Rabbi, his name was Sidney Goldstein and he was there until World War II and he became a chaplain in the army. Then when he came back, he was married. Then we had

Rabbi Baron Weiss, and he was a Rabbi here for 40 years, for over 40 years. He just retired.

DODSON: Now is the original building still in existence? Your very first synagogue?

RATNER: No, the original building...well the first synagogue!

DODSON: Yes.

RATNER: In the 20's, there was building there on Chandler Boulevard out near Whitsett, that's what became North Hollywood and Van Nuys. And the streetcar use to run right there and this was on the other, and this was kind of low there. So there was this house, this big house with a big cellar and that was for sale...

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